

picture profile



Putting Ethics Before Science

TEXT BY JENNIFER G. HICKEY/PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK KOZAK

As the senior senator from Kansas, Sam Brownback weighs in strongly on matters close to the heart and the heartland, from cloning and bioethics to farming.

With the decision to retire at the end of the 107th Congress made by old-guard Republican Sens. Phil Gramm of Texas and Jesse Helms of North Carolina, it is time to ask: From where will the next generation of conservative leaders come?

In one case, it may be from the land of Dorothy and her clicking heels, of the Great Plains bronzed by a sprawling coat of wheat and, of course, the rock chalk of the Kansas Jayhawks. In recent years Sen. Sam Brownback has emerged as one of the most eager conservative legislators on Capitol Hill, with an unrelenting focus on issues as varied as his own background, which includes experience as a farmer, a lawyer and a radio broadcaster.

"Yes, things have been very busy of late," Brownback tells **INSIGHT**. His senatorial committee responsibilities include serving as ranking member of the Judiciary subcommittee on Immigration. He also holds seats on the Foreign Relations Committee, where he is a Middle East specialist, and the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, on which he must tackle the myriad issues rising from the ever-evolving and merging telecommunications industry.

Yet Brownback's impact has been felt even more on matters closer to the heart — namely, cloning and bioethics. Before the issue of embryonic stem-cell research captured media attention last summer, Brownback was a leading force in calling for caution as science raced past both law and ethics in the new areas of genetic engineering and human cloning. Almost sin-

glehandedly, the senator has fought to keep the issue on the Senate agenda, insisting on a commitment from Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) to allow a vote on legislation to ban cloning.

Insight: Before we get to cloning, senator, what is your reaction to the mid-March snafu by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) granting education visas for two of the dead Sept. 11 hijackers and the impact this revelation will have on pending legislation to reform the immigration system?

Sen. Sam Brownback: Well, I was horrified when I heard about that. It was even more outrageous considering that these were probably the two most publicized hijackers.

Insight: The issue of how to reform the INS and our nation's immigration system has heated up since Sept. 11, and even more so since the recent snafu at INS. There are lots of reform proposals milling around Capitol Hill. How can the system be reformed?

SB: The way that we're headed right now is to force these [governmental] agencies [that deal with immigration and related problems] to share information and work together to get biometric-reading cards so that we know who we're dealing with.

We have held a couple of hearings on this, and I have had a lot of conversations with administration officials. What we were finding is that the State Department had information, and the INS had information and some officials at the CIA and the FBI also had information — but they were not sharing it.

Personal Bio



Sam Brownback: Giving rodeo the old college try while attending Kansas State University.

Currently: U.S. senator from Kansas, 1996-present; up for re-election in 2004.

Personal: Born Sept. 12, 1956, in Parker, Kan. Wife, Mary; children: Abby, Andy and Liz. Methodist.

Education: B.S. in agricultural economics, with honors, Kansas State University; J.D., University of Kansas Law School.

Career highlights: Radio farm broadcaster, KKSU; practicing attorney, New York City; instructor in law, Kansas State University; coauthor of two books; city attorney, Ogden and Leonardville, Kan.; Kansas secretary of agriculture; U.S. representative, 2nd District of Kansas, 1994-96.

Current reading: *The Life and Letters of Stonewall Jackson* by his wife, Mary Anna Jackson.

Historical figure most admired: Frank Carlson, former U.S. representative, senator and governor of Kansas, who helped to start the annual National Prayer Breakfast.

This involves the State Department as well because it often is the first line in issuing visas overseas. We need to know, when someone is standing there applying for a visa, that they are who they say they are. And biometric readers will be able to establish that. This makes it possible to prevent them from getting into the United States in the first place.

Insight: As has been evidenced by the steady stream of horror stories involving airport security, there is a big difference between passing legislation and implementing reform. What kind of time span do you see before provisions of the border-security bill, such as biometrics, are implemented?

SB: Time lines are established in the legislation. In our border-security bill, which we introduced a year ago, we originally had a year deadline before the system had to be implemented. We held a number of hearings in which experts said they liked the objective and agreed with it but think it's too aggressive.

What they are telling us is that the vision [of consolidating information] is simple enough, but implementation is very difficult.

These are reforms which we were looking at before Sept. 11. For some time we've been trying to split the INS into organizations by function. An enforcement function [of INS rules on visa renewal and leaving the country] would be one. The other function would be the handling of all applications of people coming into the United States.

It's not a reform that's going to occur overnight because most of this still involves moving paper and inputting the data manually. But there probably is a good way to go. We need to make technological improvements but, of course, you can never entirely eliminate the human element of the equation.

Insight: Another piece of legislation that has passed the House and is waiting to be addressed in the Senate involves class-action-lawsuit reform. The aim of the bill is to clamp down on what seems to be an ever-increasing number of lawsuits. Do we need to change the system, and what are your views of that legislation?

SB: When I first ran for Congress, one of the issues I campaigned on was tort reform. I continue to believe we need tort reform.

Certainly people who have grievances should be able to seek claims, but the impact of ever-more lawsuits can be devastating to the economy and consumers as well. If you look at the aviation industry, you will find one of the most striking examples of the impact of lawsuits on a sector. In the 1980s, a large number of lawsuits were filed against both airlines and manufacturers. As a result, prices went up and the industry and consumers suffered.

Insight: Each year the debate about the farm bill grows more contentious. What needs to be done about this?

SB: First, I think most farmers are philosophically opposed to getting money from the government. They would much rather have less [governmental] involvement. But the reality is that they need assistance.

We've got to face that difficult question: What is a young human? Is it a person or a piece of property?

The problem has been, and it was when I was agriculture secretary in Kansas, that the European market is so heavily subsidized. This put U.S. farmers at a disadvantage in the marketplace. Ensuring free trade would be the best thing the government could do for farmers.

Insight: Farmers certainly are one of your primary concerns back home, but issues closer to home for all of us are adult and embryonic stem-cell research, cloning and the state of our bioethics. What is the status of your bill, the Human Cloning Prohibition Act, which is cosponsored by Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana?

SB: At this moment, I don't think either side has the votes.

Insight: Stem-cell research and cloning are very complex issues. Do you think the media do a disservice by focusing on the virulence of the debate itself rather than the issues being debated?

SB: Overall, I have been positively sur-

prised by the coverage. But I would say the media do a disservice by framing the issue in terms of pro-choice against pro-life, liberal versus conservative.

Remember that you have on the question of cloning a coalition of pro-life and pro-choice advocates, a coalition of the left, the right and the center, that has made people take a second look and say, "Well, why are these groups, which don't agree on much of anything else, opposed to human cloning?" This causes people to start to look at the rationale and the reasoning behind the arguments.

Insight: There have been discoveries in the field of adult stem-cell research and moves forward in cloning since President George W. Bush made his cautionary announcement last summer. Is the debate different than it was last year?

SB: Recent developments should have changed the debate dramatically. We now can grow master stem cells outside the body. Before, we needed embryonic stem cells. Opponents claimed proposals to use adult stem cells were not legitimate science, and now we've come all this distance to where they're grown outside the body.

Insight: It seems in recent years with stem-cell research and now with cloning that our science has been allowed to trump our ethics. Do you think our ethics are likely to catch up to scientific developments in this field?

SB: The point we are at right now is similar to when we split the atom, but it is on the level of egg and sperm. We are at a point where we can operate on a child in vitro. We are cloning animals and are at the developing stages of germ-line manipulation. We've got to face that difficult question: What is a young human? I mean, is it a person or is it a piece of property? We need to be having a debate about the moral significance of the embryo, questioning when life begins.

There is a view that we should do embryonic stem-cell research because it may produce a cure for Alzheimer's and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis [Lou Gehrig's disease] and Parkinson's and all of those other awful diseases. And we definitely do want to find cures, but embryonic stem-cell research is extraordinarily dubious in its possibilities. And there are other options.

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